



Scaling China's Ivory Tower

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Scaling China's Ivory Tower

Fifteen years ago, China launched a series of ambitious reforms designed to propel its top universities into the upper ranks of so-called “world-class universities.” Two major initiatives, known as Project 985 and Project 211, pumped huge amounts of central state funding into a handful of leading universities deemed capable of rising in the global rankings of research universities. Bibliometrics, or the counting of articles published in SCI and SSCI journals, became the gold standard for measuring China's progress in scaling the ivory tower.

As a result of this strategic scaling, armies of post-doctoral fellows were hired by all of China's major universities. These are young scholars (often with considerable overseas research and study experience) who have no teaching duties and are employed on short-term contracts, renewable upon producing a specified quota of SCI or SSCI journal articles. Faculty members are rewarded with generous bonuses for publishing in these outlets as well.

In terms of raw output, the results have been impressive. Since 2009, China has been the world's second biggest producer of scientific papers indexed in SCI; in just this past year, China's production of SCI papers leapt by 24%. In terms of measurable impact, however, the results are less impressive, with per paper citations well below the world average.

I am not qualified to comment on the effect of these trends for the development of Chinese science and technology. But in the social sciences and humanities – fields that I do know a bit about – it seems clear that the introduction of bibliometrics has been highly problematic for intellectual growth. The rewards for SSCI publications have encouraged Chinese scholars in the humanities and social sciences to publish numerous short articles in English language journals when in fact their scholarship might be better cultivated and communicated through the publication of fewer but longer, more thoughtful works – books instead of articles – written in Chinese rather than English. Does it make sense for a Chinese scholar of Tang poetry to struggle to publish her work in English language journals? The problem was recognized and remedied somewhat by the introduction in 2000 of a Chinese

Social Science Citation Index, CSSCI, developed at Nanjing University, which covers Chinese language journals in the social sciences and humanities. But the leading universities in China continue to privilege publications in English, with SSCI articles bringing bigger bonuses and faster promotions than CSSCI publications.

Critical as the language issue is, perhaps even more significant for scholarly development is the question of format. Is outstanding work in the humanities and social sciences best presented in article form? It is hard to imagine that most of the great thinkers in the social sciences and humanities would have had the same impact had they presented their arguments as articles rather than books.

But fewer and fewer scholars in China are writing big books these days. Take the field of political science. Contemporary China is surely one of the most important and illuminating sites for developing new theories of politics, yet it is producing scant scholarship along these lines. Part of the blame rests, of course, with the severe constraints placed on academic freedom by the Chinese Communist Party. But an even greater problem may be that most young Chinese scholars (particularly those with overseas training) are too distracted by the rewards of the bibliometric game to devote serious time and thought to the more demanding and less lucrative work of writing big books that place China's rich experience in a broader interpretive or analytical context.

What can be done about this, in China or elsewhere? If one is irrevocably committed to bibliometrics, then there could at least be more credit given for books published in major academic series from reputable academic presses. Moving beyond bibliometrics, there could be greater public recognition of scholarly books – in the form of competitive prizes sponsored by scholarly associations, universities, and publishing houses – and reflected in salaries and promotions. Most important, the primary means of assessing the quality and impact of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences must be peer review, through the solicitation of detailed letters of evaluation from noted experts in the field. Serious evaluation requires reading and responding to

the work, rather than simply counting it or assigning points based upon the prestige of the journal in which it appeared. Serious evaluation is a time consuming and admittedly somewhat subjective process, which places a heavy burden on leading scholars at major institutions. But the alternative is a mindless exercise that relieves us of the responsibility of engaging with each other's work and reduces the art of academic assessment to a crude calculus unable to distinguish between quantity and quality. An ivory tower scaled in that manner is unlikely to be one renowned for its humanities and social sciences.